# ST. NICHOLAS.

VOL. XXIV. FEBRUARY, 1897. NO. 4.

## A SIBERIAN SCARE.

By George Kennan.

I WONDER if any one has ever heard of an arctic ghost. Is there on record any well authenticated case of supernatural apparition in Spitzbergen, for example, or Greenland, or Novaya Zemlya, or in the midst of the great polar ice-pack? Has any arctic explorer ever seen a ghost or heard of one, north of latitude 65°? Ghosts seem to be plentiful enough in the north temperate zone and in the tropics, but, so far as I know, I am the only person who has ever encountered one in the far North.

I first heard of my ghost in the winter of 1865–66, when I was exploring a route for a telegraph line through northeastern Siberia, and was living temporarily in a small Russian village called Anadyrsk (An-ad'-eersk), about four hundred miles west of Bering Strait. I had rented from one of the natives in this village a one-story log house of the usual Siberian type, with a living-room and a small bedroom in one end, a kitchen in the other, and an outside door opening into a square entry between them. Over the living-room there was a rough, unfurnished garret or attic, which could be reached by climbing a notched log set up ladder-wise in the entry, but which during my occupancy of the house was never used, and was empty. It had a floor of rough spruce boards laid loosely across the joists, and it received a little light from the door in the entry below; but it was never warmed, and in winter its floor was generally covered with snow which sifted in through chinks and cracks in the neglected roof. I was alone in this house, with the exception of a native boy sixteen or seventeen years of age, named Yegor (Yeh-gor'), who cooked and kept house for me, and who slept on the floor in the kitchen. Our outside door was never locked at night, and indeed I don't think there was such a thing as a lock in the whole settlement. Theft, burglary, and assault were crimes almost unknown to the quiet, upright people of Anadyrsk; and as they left their doors unlocked and unbolted from one year's end to another, I naturally followed their example.

One dark still night in February, between ten and eleven o'clock, as I lay in bed reading, I was startled by the quick and violent throw-

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ing open of the entry door, and a swift rush of somebody into the adjacent sitting-room.

"Who 's that?" I demanded. There was no reply, but as I sprang out of bed to investigate, I was met at the sitting-room door by what looked like the wraith of Yegor. His long, dark hair was disheveled, his eyes were dilated, his face was as pale as ashes, and as he stood there, trembling violently and looking apprehensively toward the door through which he had just come, he seemed the very embodiment of horror and fear.

"Why, Yegor!" I exclaimed, "what 's the matter?"

For a moment he seemed unable to speak, but with an effort he controlled himself, and said in a low, excited tone, "There 's something walking in the kitchen."

"Nonsense!" I replied. "You 've had the nightmare, and you 're not more than half awake yet. Nobody would come into the kitchen at this time of night. What did you think you heard?"

"It was n't a nightmare, Barin,*" he protested. "I had n't been asleep at all. There was nobody in the room; but the minute I blew out the candle something walked across the floor in heavy boots.†"

The idea of a Siberian ghost pacing the floor of Yegor's kitchen at night in American boots was so ludicrous and incongruous that I burst into a fit of laughter.

"Where did the 'something' get its boots, Yegor?" I said jeeringly. "Mine are there in the bedroom, and there is n't another pair in the settlement."

But Yegor evidently thought the matter too serious for joking, and merely replied that he was "unable to know."

"Well, come along," I said finally. "Let 's go to the kitchen and take a look."

Putting on a fur "kukhlanka,‡" for the night was cold, I stepped out into the entry, threw open the kitchen door, held up a light, and listened. The only "things" that seemed to be "walking" in Yegor's department were the cockroaches, some of which were quite big enough to wear the boots of Lilliput, if not the boots of America.

"You see, Yegor," I said, "there 's nothing and nobody there. After you blew out your candle you probably dropped asleep without knowing it, and had a bad dream."

But Yegor was not to be thus reassured; and when we went back he begged so hard to be allowed to stay in my end of the house that I told him he might sleep on the floor beside the oven. After I had blown out my light he stole noiselessly into my room, and crawled under my bed, where, soon afterward, I heard him draw a long, deep breath of relief, as if for the first time he felt himself safe.

Several days passed without any further alarm. Yegor went back to the kitchen to sleep, and I had forgotten all about the ghost in boots, when, between eleven and twelve o'clock one night, after I had gone to bed, my attention was attracted by the sound of light, stealthy footsteps crossing the floor of the garret over my head in the direction of the sitting-room. My first thought was that Yegor had gone up there to get something; but when I remembered his fear of ghosts and recalled the fact that the garret was absolutely empty, I dismissed this explanation as altogether improbable, and decided that the footsteps were those of some poor wandering Korak§ from a neighboring encampment, who had been detained in the village overnight, and who had stolen up into our garret to sleep because it was a little warmer there than out of doors. I once thought of shouting to him that he might come down and sleep in the kitchen; but I was not sure that he would understand Russian. I knew that the Koraks were accustomed to sleep out on the snow in all kinds of weather, and I said to myself, "What 's the use of worrying about him? He 'll be comfortable enough up there; and if he is n't, he can knock at the kitchen door and wake Yegor." I heard

* "Master" or "Seigneur"—a title given by a Russian peasant to his superior in rank or position.

† The Russian word is "sapaghee'"—that is, boots with hard soles and heels, which are known to the Siberian natives as "American boots." Their own footgear is made of soft skins, and their footsteps are almost noiseless.

‡ A garment like a blouse or sweater, made of reindeer skin.

§ A nomadic tribe of Siberian natives.

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him lie down in one corner of the garret, over the sitting-room ikon *, and then, several times afterward, I heard him turn over or move uneasily, as if he found the floor of the garret a hard bed.

When Yegor brought me my coffee on the following morning, I said to him, "Who slept up in the garret last night?"

The ghost-startled expression instantly returned to his face as he replied, "Nobody."

"But somebody certainly did," I insisted; "I heard a man walk softly on tiptoe across the garret floor about eleven o'clock, and lie down in the corner over the ikon. I thought at first it was you, but I suppose it must have been some Korak. Were any of them in the village yesterday?"

Yegor declared that there had not been a Korak in the village for a week, and that the sounds in the garret were undoubtedly made by the same evil spirit that had frightened him. "The house is haunted, Barin," he said, "and we ought to have the priest come here and drive away the spirits."

"What stuff!" I exclaimed. "There 's no such thing as an evil spirit, and you ought to be ashamed, at your age, to believe old gossips' stories about haunted houses and ghosts. The footsteps in the garret were the footsteps of a man; and if you 'll make inquiries in the village, you 'll probably find out that it was some Korak who did n't want to go back to his encampment, and had no other place in which to sleep."

"If there was a man there," said Yegor, "he must have left tracks in the snow on the floor. Shall I go and look?"

"Of course he left tracks," I assented. "Go and look, if you want to. You 'll find that the footprints are those of a Korak's tor'basses. †"

The boy went out, but before he had had time, it seemed to me, to climb the notched log to the garret, he came rushing back and declared breathlessly, "There are no tracks at all!" Inasmuch as I felt absolutely certain that some human being had slept in that garret and had walked across that garret floor, this unexpected announcement was something of a "facer"; and, not knowing exactly what to say, I went out myself, climbed the log ladder in the entry, and from the top of it peered into the recesses of the dimly lighted garret. Yegor's statement was true. The floor was covered with half an inch or more of light snow, which had evidently lain there for weeks; but as for tracks, there were none. Not even a mouse had crossed that floor since the last snow-storm. Surprised and perplexed, I returned to the sitting-room and tried to think out the puzzle. That there had been somebody or something in that garret the night before, I felt positively certain; but where were the tracks? How could footsteps that made a distinct sound fail to leave an impression on light, feathery snow?

Yegor lingered about the door to see what I would say, but as I said nothing he finally inquired timidly what I thought.

"I don't know what to think, Yegor," I replied; "but if that ghost of yours in boots walks across the garret floor again, I shall try to get a sight at him, even if I can't see his tracks."

For two or three days after this Yegor took refuge at night in the house of a neighboring friend, and left me to tackle the ghost alone; but neither in the garret nor in the kitchen did I hear the faintest sound to indicate that the mysterious somebody who walked in darkness and left no tracks was abroad. Meantime, however, the news that a ghost had appeared to Yegor in the Barin's kitchen, and that even the skeptical Barin himself had heard the "unclean spirit" pacing the floor of the garret at midnight, spread to every house in the village; and the next Sunday afternoon who should appear at my door but a Russian priest, dressed in all his robes and followed by one of the church choir-boys with a basin of water and a small bundle of long, flexible twigs. The reverend father came in swinging a smoking

* In one corner of every Siberian house there is a smoky, gilt-incrusted portrait of some old Russian saint, called an ikon (ee-kon'), before which all members of the Orthodox Greek Church are accustomed to cross themselves upon entering the room, and to say their prayers at night and in the morning.

† The wandering natives of Siberia wear boots called "tor'basses" or "torbassa'," made, somewhat after the fashion of moccasins, out of soft reindeer skin sewed with thread of dried sinews.

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censer and reciting sonorously a selection from the old Slavonic psalter. He marched solemnly around the entry, the kitchen, and the sitting-room, fumigating every nook and corner where a ghost might lurk, and then took the basin and the brush of twigs and sprinkled the whole house with water after the manner of the Greek Church. Having thus performed his official duty, he greeted me courteously, apologized for the intrusion, and said that it was his custom to conduct a ceremony of that kind once a year in every house in the village. I was not, of course, a member of his church; but he had taken the liberty, he said, of coming to my house, because there were reports in circulation that mysterious noises had been heard in it, and the minds of his parishioners were disturbed.

After this visit of the Russian priest Yegor recovered his courage, and began again to sleep in the kitchen. He evidently thought that no "unclean spirit" would dare to reënter a house whose floor had just been sprinkled, and whose atmosphere was still pervaded by the odor of incense. But he underestimated the audacity of ghosts in American boots. At about eleven o'clock upon the very next night I distinctly heard again those soft, stealthy footsteps in the garret. They seemed to proceed diagonally from the top of the log ladder to the corner over the ikon, and as the night was intensely cold and very still, I could distinctly hear the faint squeaking of the frosty snow on the garret floor under the pressure of the mysterious intruder's feet.

I sprang out of bed in my night-shirt, rushed to the entry, climbed the notched log, and with the words, "What are you doing here?" on my lips, held the candle over my head and looked into the garret, expecting to see a man. But there was not a living thing there! I was so astonished and dumfounded that I could only stare into the empty room, while a chill, due partly to cold and partly to a sense of mystery, crinkled down my back. Less than thirty seconds before, somebody had certainly walked on tiptoe across that garret floor; and yet not only was the garret untenanted, but the snow on the floor was as smooth and undisturbed as it had been when Yegor and I looked at it the week before. After listening intently for two or three minutes without hearing the faintest sound, I returned to my room, dressed myself, and sat down to await further developments. I was determined to solve the mystery of those ghostly footsteps, even if I had to go up into the garret to sleep. In the course of twenty minutes I heard distinctly a noise as if some person were turning over or moving about on the floor of the garret just above the ikon. I crept to the door between the sitting-room and the entry, opened it softly, and listened. The noise had ceased. Apparently the person who made it had heard me open the door and had also stopped to listen. I climbed up into the garret, and found it dark, still, and empty as it had been before.

By this time I had begun to feel very uncomfortable and very much exasperated. That something walked and moved about in that garret was absolutely certain; but how it crossed the floor without disturbing the snow, and how it noiselessly and mysteriously escaped every time I went to look for it, were questions that baffled me. The next time I heard the stealthy, creaking footsteps overhead I put on a fur hood and a kukhlanka, and climbed up into the garret, prepared to stay there, if necessary, until morning. The place was empty and still, of course, as before; but I took my stand near the chimney, with a candle in my hand, and waited patiently to see whether the noises would begin again in my presence. For twenty minutes or more there was not a sound. Then, suddenly, I heard the footsteps again, louder than ever, but instead of being on the floor of the garret they were directly over my head. I climbed hastily down the notched log, rushed out of doors, and looked up on the roof. The night was moonless, but the stars furnished light enough to enable one to see the outline of any dark object against the white background of snow; and, so far as I could discover, there was nothing on the house or near it. I then went into the kitchen and, with some trouble, waked the boy.

"Yegor," I said, "I have just chased your ghost out of the garret, and he has gone up on the roof. I want you to come outdoors and stay on one side of the house, while I go around

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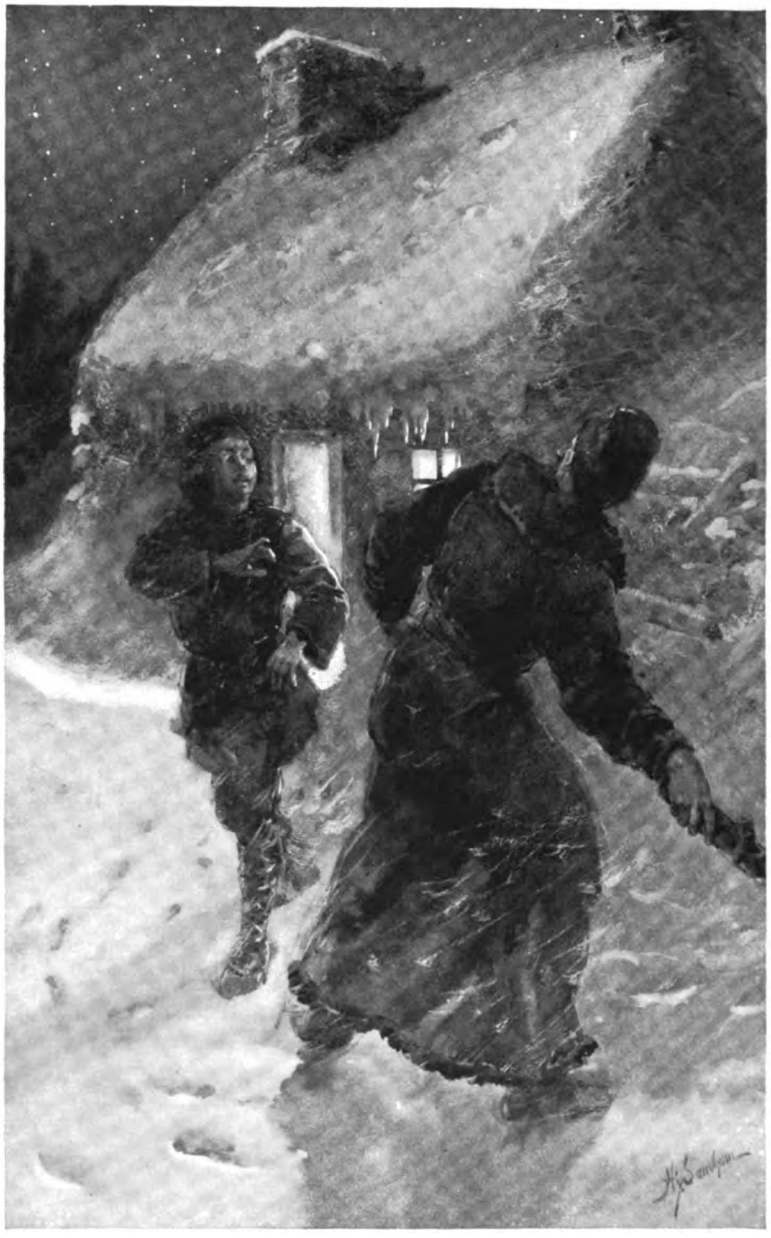
the other, and perhaps we 'll be able to get a sight of him."

As soon as Yegor waked up sufficiently to realize the nature of the service required of him, he was simply paralyzed with fear. He refused absolutely at first to go out of doors at all, even with me; but when I told him that the ghost had apparently left the garret through the roof, and so might possibly come down the chimney into the kitchen as soon as I should begin the attack outside, poor Yegor decided to take his chances in the open; but incessantly he muttered low prayers for protection from spirits, at short intervals, and trembled so with cold and terror that his teeth chattered. I walked around the front of the house, with Yegor at my elbow, and examined the roof carefully on both sides. It was covered with old, hardened snow, which in places was somewhat drifted; but there was not a sign on it of any living thing, and I did not see how anybody or anything could get access to it without a ladder.



"PICKING UP A STICK OF FIREWOOD, I HURLED IT WITH ALL MY STRENGTH AT THE CHIMNEY." (SEE NEXT PAGE.)

I was just about to abandon the search outside and return to the garret, when it suddenly struck me that there was something peculiar in the dark outline of the western chimney. It looked lumpy on one side, as if a man's figure were crouching close against it in the black shadow. I changed my point of view a little, and became satisfied that the queer object was a man dressed in a dark fur kukhlanka.

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"Who 's that?" I shouted in Russian. "I see you there in the shadow of the chimney! Come down out of that!"

There was no reply, and the figure did not move. Picking up a stick of firewood from a little pile near the entry door, I hurled it with all my strength at the chimney. Just as it struck the bricks, out leaped the "ghost"—a huge, shaggy Siberian sledge-dog, who ran swiftly along the ridge-pole of the roof to the kitchen end of the house, sprang off into the darkness, and disappeared.

"Well, Yegor," I said, "there 's your ghost at last, and it 's nothing but a dog!"

Upon making an examination, I discovered that in the shelter of the eastern or kitchen end of the house the prevailing northwesterly gales had formed a huge snowdrift, which rose to within about a foot of the eaves. This sloping drift, under the influence of wind and frost, had slowly hardened until it would support the weight of a man; and one or more of the village dogs had formed the habit of climbing up it to the roof at night, walking about on the housetop, and perhaps lying down to sleep against the warm side of the chimney. In the dead stillness of an arctic winter night their footsteps on the roof sounded to a person in the house below exactly as if they were in the garret; and I found afterward, by experiment, that if a man walked across the roof at night on tiptoe, it was almost impossible for a listener in the sitting-room to decide whether he was in the garret or on the housetop.

It is hardly necessary to say that neither Yegor nor his superstitious village friends ever accepted my common-sense explanation of the mysterious footsteps. The story which was current the next winter was that after the priest drove the "unclean spirit" out of the house with incense and holy water, it took refuge on the roof; and that when the Barin found it there, and began to pelt it with chunks of wood, the spirit suddenly took the form of an immense dog, snarled fiercely, and immediately vanished in a thick cloud.

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